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ABSTRACT

The Coffee County (Georgia) Board of Education voted to consolidate Nicholls and Broxton High Schools with Coffee High School. This case study analyzes the issues of school consolidation, benefits to students and financial implications through sociological and political science perspectives. Data were collected by personal interview, document analysis, and a questionnaire survey. Three major conclusions were reached. From the political science (financial) point of view, the decision to consolidate was in the best interest of the citizens of Coffee County because: (1) there were three high schools, but the available state money was only enough to support one; (2) the county supported 50 teachers with local funds, to keep 2 small high schools functional; and (3) the current school millage was 20 mills, which is the maximum allowed by law. From the political science (power) perspective, the state's Quality Basic Education Act placed financial pressure on systems to consolidate by granting "reward" money. While the local board of education had the power to vote on the decision, citizens and students appeared powerless. From the sociological perspective, the smaller schools will lose their identity and community spirit as a result of consolidation; however, curriculum advantages will be gained. Further research should address the effects of consolidation on communities and businesses, student relationships in the new schools, and the effectiveness of large versus small schools. (KS)

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The Consolidation of a Rural School District: A Case Study

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The Consolidation of a Rural School District: A Case Study

Any issue that involves children is certainly prone to be critically analyzed by all concerned. Whether it be parents, educators, politicians, or children themselves, feelings run deep. If one considers society of today and the issues facing it concerning children, this becomes apparent. Issues such as abortion, child abuse, and homelessness are such concerns, but what can be done? The possibilities of all agreeing on equitable solutions are at best remote. So it is with the topic of this piece of research. The issue of concern, the consolidation, or reorganization, of the Coffee County School System most assuredly has precipitated criticism by every group mentioned above plus many others.

On November 21, 1989, the Coffee County Board of Education voted unanimously (5-0) in favor of the consolidation of Nicholls and Broxton High Schools with Coffee High School. Local citizens' groups have appealed the decision all the way to the State Board of Education and have been rejected. Their last chance is a suit that has been filed against the superintendent and the school board, but again, this attempt to halt reorganization will most likely be thwarted.

Consolidation is certainly not a new word to the citizens of Coffee County. Coffee County is a rapidly developing area of southeast Georgia with many new industries and businesses recently locating in the county. Most of this growth has occurred in the county seat of Douglas. Douglas is the largest town in the county, which includes the smaller towns of Broxton, Nicholls, and Ambrose. At one time these smaller towns, along with some other communities in the county, had their own schools (K-12). These schools were located in Douglas, Broxton, Nicholls, Ambrose, West Green, Satilla, Hebron, New Forest, Upton, and Pridgen. In 1951, the citizens of these communities voted on whether or not to merge with the city of Douglas to form a county school system. As a result of this merger attempt, all communities voted to merge their junior high and high schools with the exception of Broxton and Nicholls. As a result of this merger, the West Green, Ambrose, and Satilla communities kept their elementary schools (K-6), while Broxton and Nicholls kept their K-12 schools. All other schools were closed.

In 1978, an attempt was made to pass a bond referendum that would fund the building of a comprehensive high school in the city of Douglas. This would have involved the closing of Broxton and Nicholls

High Schools, along with the closing of Ambrose Elementary School. This attempt at consolidation of the high schools failed when put to the voters.

With the advent of the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) in Georgia, came the push at the state level to consolidate smaller schools or school districts, or to create larger schools or school districts. It became obvious to the Coffee County school board that something would have to be done locally or the state would step in and take action. The local school board was pressured by state authorities to develop a five-year building plan for the Coffee County School System. The plan they chose involved the building of a comprehensive high school, development of two middle schools (grades 6-8), and transforming all present K-6 elementary schools to K-5. The plan also proposed the closing of Broxton and Nicholls Junior High and High Schools. The plan was approved at the state level and voted upon by the local school board on November 21, 1989. As stated previously, the plan was approved by a 5-0 vote.

Consolidation will occur in the Coffee County School System in the fall of 1990. All county high school students will be housed at the present Coffee High School campus. The new high school will be completed in three years, at which time the two middle

schools will be opened and all elementary schools will be K-5.

This decision by the school board, whether right or wrong, has certainly caused a rift in this south Georgia community. Feeling toward the high schools run strong in the communities of Broxton and Nicholls. The decision to consolidate has resulted in name calling, accusations, and bitterness. The school board has stated on many occasions that the decision was purely financial. The school board and the residents of Broxton and Nicholls argue over the benefits that will be either lost or gained as a result of the reorganization of the high schools. "Bigger is not always better" was a phrase heard throughout the interviewing process of this research.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is not to question whether consolidation is the right thing to do. It is done. The purpose is to look at the issues and analyze them. The issues being considered are school size, benefits to students, and financial implications. The data collected in these areas will then be viewed through sociological and political science perspectives. The political science perspective will be broken down into two areas: economics and power.

Methodology

Investigator Information

All three investigators involved in this case study have pursued their professional training in the field of education. Two of the investigators hold education specialist degrees in educational administration and supervision. The third investigator has earned a masters degree in the field of special education. All are currently PH.D. students in the field of educational administration and supervision at Georgia State University.

Professionally, all have worked in the public school system most of their respective careers. The average tenure of the investigators in the school system is 14.6 years. While two of the researchers remain in the field of education, one has attained a position in public administration. One researcher has attained a position in educational administration and supervision as an assistant principal, while the other two have described public school administration positions as their ultimate goals.

The researchers possess different philosophical orientations based upon their personal and professional backgrounds. Two of the researchers tend to view the consolidation issue from a political science

perspective. They tend to view the reorganization process from the stance that power, or the politics of a social institution, may have had a huge influence on the decision to consolidate. Along with the "power" perspective, they seem to view the decision from an economic, or financial, point of view. The final investigator views the process from a sociological outlook. How will this process affect interactions and relationships among people in the schools and the different communities?

Biases of the researchers toward the issue at hand are apparent. One researcher recognizes a bias toward the "bigger is not always better" theory. This person is in favor of retaining smaller schools. Another researcher leans toward the large, comprehensive high school based on potential savings to taxpayers and maximum utilization of funds. The final researcher does have biases, however, they are for and against the issue of consolidation. This is properly called "straddling the fence." This investigator attended a small school, and has always been proud of that fact. However, this particular person also lives in the city of Douglas and can envision the financial benefits to be reaped from this particular instance of consolidation.

Description of Methods

In attaining the data to be analyzed from the various philosophical perspectives, several methods were used. While most of the data were obtained through qualitative methods, a minimal amount of quantitative data was attained in an attempt to achieve cross-validation or triangulation.

Qualitative, or Naturalistic methods.

The first qualitative method used was the interview. A prescribed set of questions was not used as the investigators felt that people would be very responsive to such a controversial issue without much prompting. The researchers could not have been keener in their foresight of this phenomenon. Twelve individuals were interviewed, and all were very "thick and rich" in their discussion of consolidation. The researchers felt that no punches were pulled and the respondents were very much to the point on the issues. Included as interviewees were (a) principals, involved in the consolidation issue, (b) a current school board member, (c) a past school board member, (d) a member of the central office staff who was critical in developing the facts and figures used as a rationale in favor of consolidation, (e) residents of the Nicholls and Braxton

communities, and (f) students from Nicholls and Broxton High Schools.

Another naturalistic method used was the analysis of documents. These documents came in various shapes and sizes and were of tremendous assistance in attempting to analyze and interpret data from a perspective "lens." Documents searched included (a) the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE), (b) various newspapers, (c) various statistical documents developed by school authorities in demonstration of the need to reorganize the school district, (d) minutes from school board meetings, and (e) informal documents prepared by the citizens of the small school communities.

The final qualitative method employed involved analyzing and interpreting comments provided by respondents to a questionnaire that will be discussed in the quantitative data section.

Quantitative methods.

The method used to obtain data was a questionnaire developed by the investigators. The instrument was brief and addressed the issues of interest (school size, benefits, and financial concerns) of the authors. The questionnaire included a Likert-like Scale with responcents rating a statement. All statements were

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prefaced with this question: Do you agree with this statement? The statements to be rated were:

1. The decision to consolidate was made based on what was best for the students of Coffee County.
2. The decision to consolidate was based on financial considerations (funding, taxes, etc.).
3. The decision to consolidate will provide benefits previously not available to all students (more course offerings, more social interaction, more facilities, etc.).
4. A large comprehensive high school will be good for the students of Coffee County.

A copy of the survey and a tally of the results are included as Appendix A.

The questionnaires were mailed to 100 randomly selected individuals from the Douglas, Broxton, and Nicholls' phone books. Every one-hundredth name was selected. If a business was selected, the next name was used. The questionnaires were sent with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Of 100 questionnaires sent, 29 were returned with 26 of the returned questionnaires having usable information. Twenty-two of the questionnaires returned were from Douglas residents, four from the outlying communities.

Measures Taken To Insure A Trustworthy Study

When designing the methods to be used in this study, the investigators felt that certain measures should be taken to insure some sort of trustworthiness. Since qualitative, or naturalistic inquiry, was the primary mode of acquiring data, these trustworthiness measures seemed appropriate.

Care was taken to select representatives from both sides of the issue for interview purposes. Knowledgeable people from different walks of life were selected. Conversations were recorded in their entirety and then transcribed by the interviewers. Great caution was taken by the interviewers to avoid influencing the responses of the respondents. Comments by interviewers were kept to a minimum. Probing questions were usually not used until late in the interview to give the interviewees time to relax and tell it the way they "see" it. As stated previously, the respondents were very open and very anxious to air their views. These characteristics plus those mentioned above lead the researchers to believe the interview process yielded trustworthy results.

Perusal of documents appears to be a trustworthy way to attain data for a qualitative study. Documents are basically in black and white for anyone to analyze

and interpret. To add to this trustworthiness, documents were attained from the board as well as groups from Broxton and Nicholls.

Quantitative data has a trustworthiness of its own in that subjects are usually randomly selected and numbers are many times hard to dispute. The researchers involved with this study did incorporate two methods we felt would help assure this trustworthiness. First, the questionnaires were sent from a city approximately 60 miles from the Coffee County area. We felt this would add to the honesty of the respondents as it would appear local people were not involved in this research on the consolidation issue. The other method was to place the number of the questionnaire behind the stamp so only the investigators would know from where it was returned. Using this technique, no numbers or marks appeared on the questionnaire.

Presentation Of Data

The analyses of all data collected by the investigators are presented in this section. Both the quantitative and qualitative information will be analyzed in an attempt to produce some results that can be verified through the demonstration of appropriate data. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the data will be analyzed from three different perspective lenses

(power,economics, and sociological). Each lens will be presented separately.

Political Science (Power)

Power is an important element in any organizational structure. "It is the ability to mobilize resources (human and material) to get things done" (Kanter, 1987, p. 350). It may be given, earned, or assumed. It is not always clear who holds the power to control an organization. Through close examination it may be found that those who appear to hold power are not really the ones pulling the strings.

When considering the issue of the consolidation of the Coffee County High Schools, it appears that the state has tremendous power. According to Salancik and Pfeffer (1989), "The fact that power revolves around scarce and critical activities, of course, makes the control and organization of those activities a major battleground in struggles for power" (p. 237). In Georgia, the state controls funding of education giving them considerable reward power. French and Raven (1989) defined reward power "as power whose basis is the ability to reward" (p. 197).

The state exercises this power through requirements set forth in the 1989 edition of the Quality Basic

Education Act of Georgia (QBE), section 20-2-291. According to this section:

> A school system will receive a 50 percent reduction in its cost to consolidate its small schools if these consolidations result in base size schools and they are consistent with the K-5, 6-8, 9-12 organizational pattern or contain all the students in the grade span within the school system. (p. 121)

This rewards school systems that are willing to consolidate their smaller schools into base-sized units. If this is not enticement enough, the state has also adopted some "punishment" criteria to be used in situations where small schools do not consolidate. According to an unpublished task force report from the office of Larry Gess (1984), Director of Strategic Planning with the State Department of Education, schools that are larger than base size can receive additional funding for school-wide services while schools smaller than base size must use local funds or operate at a lower service level. This same report also made a recommendation demonstrating the state's belief that larger schools can operate more cost effectively. This recommendation addresses high schools (grades 9-12):

> Recommendation: The Service Delivery Committee recommends Alternative 1 to the Education Review Commission - that each high school with less than 485 students in grades 9-12 should be flagged to receive an in-depth analysis by the state to determine if it could be consolidated with another high school. If not, the analysis should be done to determine what additional assistance would be necessary to ensure that at least one senior year elective in each course area can be offered on an alternative year basis. (p. 16)

This recommendation was important in Coffee County as it contained two high schools with less than 485 students. During the 1988-1989 academic year, Broxton had approximately 155 students and Nicholls had approximately 152 students. The state informed Coffee County that it had until December 31, 1989 to submit a five-year facilities plan addressing this issue or the state would devise one for the county. This demonstrates an aspect of power described by Mechanic (1987):

> Power is closely related to dependence. To the extent that a person is dependent on another, he is potentially subject to the other person's power. Within organizations one makes others dependent

> upon him by controlling access to information, persons, and instrumentalities. (p. 336)

In the case of Coffee County, the school system is dependent on state money. Thus the state holds power over the system by demanding compliance. Hersey, Blanchard, and Natemeyer (1989) suggest that this is a demonstration of reward power as defined by French and Raven. Coffee County Superintendent Travis Outzs seemed to recognize the power of the state government to control school funds. At a board meeting held on November 14, 1989 (the Douglas Enterprise), Superintendent Outzs talked about the state's commitment to issuing capital outlay funds to aid consolidation efforts. "It is for this reason," the superintendent explained, "that almost 75% of Georgia's school systems have converted their school systems to the configurations and requirements of QBE and have bitten the bullet and gone forward with consolidation" (p. 1). Does this indicate that the state is the major power influence behind the consolidation effort? According to Salancik and Pfeffer (1989):

> Most organizations manage to evolve a distribution of power and influence that is aligned with the critical realities they face in the environment. The environment in turn includes both the internal

contexts in which particular decisions get made, and the external environments that it can hope to influence but is unlikely to control. (p. 238)

This distribution of power and influence extends to the school board and to the citizens who elect members to the board. The critical realities faced in Coffee County included a school board assessed millage rate that had already been levied up to 20 mills, the maximum allowed by law. According to a school board member, the system would need 21 mills to operate during the 1990-91 school year. This would put the system operating in deficit financing at which point the state takes over operations.

Another area of concern was that Broxton and Nicholls High Schools were both smaller than the state's base size recommendation which meant that the state would probably flag these schools to receive an in-depth analysis to determine if consolidation was a possibility. The research reported in the unpublished task force report from Larry Gess was inconclusive concerning the issue of school size. Several studies not included in Gess' report seem to indicate that small schools have advantages over larger schools when considering student participation, satisfaction, attendance, performance, and dropout rates (Friedkin &

Necochea, 1988; Lindsay, 1982, 1984; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). These advantages were repeatedly mentioned in comments made on the questionnaires and from the interviews. Citizens were concerned with their loss of community and personal identity, less opportunities for student participation, less one-on-one interaction with teachers, and the fact that there was no consideration given to the opinions of the citizens who would be losing their schools. One respondent wrote,

> I think by putting the students from Nicholls and Broxton in a larger school you will be taking away their chances of better expressing themselves such as their clubs and other activities. The long bus rides for some of the students will be unusually hard on them and will cause more students to drop out of school. A smaller school gives more students a chance to better express themselves. They will not get the attention they need if they are forced to attend larger, overcrowded schools.

While another respondent wrote,

> There is no need to put all the schools together. Classes are already at each school as needed. There is no need for students to take bus trips that far from home to go to school when there is

> already a school in their town. The students will resent going to a new school where they have so much change. When schools combine each school will be giving up the name of their football team and choosing another. We don't want to change from TROJANS! Ask the students!

Also cited was concern that consolidation was an attempt to create a football program with the ultimate goal of beating Valdosta, a traditional powerhouse in football in south Georgia.

The citizens of Nicholls waged a campaign to halt the reorganization. They held community meetings and attended board meetings. They contacted state legislators as well as research facilities to gain additional information concerning the issue of optimum school size and reorganizations or consolidation. They sent letters to the State Board of Education, to other states, and to attorneys. As a last resort, they filed a suit against the superintendent and the local board of education in an effort to halt the reorganization. They have been unsuccessful in influencing the local or state boards of education. According to Pfeffer (1987), "A person is not 'powerful' or 'powerless' in general, but only with respect to other social factors in a specific

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social relationship" (p. 309). In this relationship, the citizens of Nicholls appear powerless.

Historically, this has not been the case. In 1951, the citizens of Coffee County were given the opportunity to vote on consolidation with Douglas. At this time the citizens of Broxton and Nicholls chose not to merge with the city of Douglas and they retained their local schools (Douglas Enterprise, 1952).

In 1978, an attempt was made to pass a bond referendum to fund the building of a comprehensive high school in Douglas. When put to a vote, the idea failed. At this point the citizens had control over decisions affecting their local schools. This power seems to have now shifted to the local board of education, which reflects legitimate power, or power by virtue of its position in the organizational structure of government (French & Raven, 1989).

In this most recent consolidation attempt the local school board decided unanimously to accept a consolidation plan eliminating Nicholls and Broxton High Schools. They did not have to ask the voters since a bond referendum was not called for.

Some citizens seem to feel that the board has not been responsive to their needs. Their complaints are that the board no longer shows concern for the citizens

who elected them, but only demonstrates concern about strengthening the football program and accomodating local business people who stand to gain business by having a larger, more comprehensive high school to draw industry into Coffee County.

"Who has more power over whom is a mooter point than that of recognizing the inherent nature of organizing as a sharing of power" (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1989, pp. 236-237). At this point it appears that the state department is exercising reward power in that it controls funding of education. The local board has the legitimate power to make the decision to consolidate. The citizens seem to hold a less powerful position but as suggested earlier, power is situational. The citizens of Coffee County cannot change the decision of the board concerning the consolidation issue but they can demonstrate their power the next time these school board members run for election. It can be safely assumed that:

> Power is shared in organizations; and it is shared out of necessity more than out of concern for principles of organizational development or participatory democracy. Power is shared because no one person controls all the desired activities

in the organization. (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1989, p. 236)

Sociological

From a sociological perspective, the author will attempt to demonstrate how the relationships and interactions between people have developed during the reorganization process. Issues addressed include such things as race relations, loss of identity (both individual and community), curriculum, extracurricular activities, distances traveled, dangers (drugs, rape, etc.), relationships between students, dropouts, and loss of students to other schools (both public and private).

The issue of race relations is one that should be considered while considering consolidation in the south. While it may have been an issue in some systems, thus far it has not been in Coffee County. A Coffee County school principal stated, "Consolidation thus far has not been a racial issue." He went on to state, however, that "People from Nicholls have infiltrated the black community in Douglas. They have stated this is not a move for better schools or more opportunities - it's us today, you tomorrow." This quote is in reference to the belief by some that the junior high campus (the old black high school) in the predominantly black part of

town may be closed. However, according to the five-year facilities plan, this campus will remain as the smaller of the two middle schools. There are a few concerns raised from residents of Broxton and Nicholls, as stated by them in the interviews and questionnaires. They seem to have several fears, such as: (a) drug activity and arrests across the street on the "block" (a shopping center used at night as a hang out); (b) recent riots on the "block"; (c) the large number of black students at the new high school; and (d) the location of the smaller middle school in the black section of town.

While black citizens of Coffee County may be concerned about the rumored closing of the present junior high school and the loss of identity or place that would accompany such a closure, the citizens of Broxton and Nicholls are very concerned about the loss of identity that may go along with the closing of their high schools. As one interviewee stated, "I will miss the familiarity. I see a loss of personal identity resulting from this consolidation." A Nicholls student said, "We won't be as close to our classmates. We will lose the individuality we had at Nicholls." Another comment was, "Smaller schools give more students a chance to better express themselves. They will not get

the attention they need if they are forced to attend large, overcrowed schools."

While the loss of individual identity is important to the residents of Broxton and Nicholls, so is the loss of community and school identity. One Nicholls resident stated, "When you take away our high school, you take away our community identity." A citizen of Broxton said, "Nicholls and Broxton lose everything. Coffee loses nothing." A student declared, "Coffee should have to give up something: Name, colors, mascot, or slogan."

While a loss of both community and individual identity may be a disadvantage, interviewees reported that expanded curriculum choices will be an advantage. Even those who were dead set against the idea found this to be an advantage. One Nicholls resident said, "I always felt cheated because our course offerings were so limited. Students will benefit and receive a better education that will prepare them for college or work." A central office staff member added, "The curriculum will be greatly improved by offering four foreign languages, as well as strengthening advanced courses and vocational courses." "It meets the needs of all students," was a comment made by a principal.

Extracurricular activities will also be designed to meet the needs of all students, according to a member of

the central office staff. According to her, "Greater opportunity for extracurricular activity will exist as a result of consolidation." However, even though more activities may be available, feelings appear to lean in the direction that fewer students may actually participate. "I was a cheerleader at Nicholls. I believe competition will be greater at Coffee High School. This will cause less participation by students," was a comment made by a student from Nicholls. Statements such as this would also seem to confirm the feelings that students who were important at Nicholls and Broxton may not be prominent anymore. At the small high school they were "big fish in a little pond" while at the larger high school they may be "little fish in a big pond." Most respondents stated generally that there would be less opportunity to participate.

If indeed fewer students from Broxton and Nicholls participate in extracurricular activities, then the possibility of involvement in crime and dangerous activities may increase. In reference to the crime and drug issue, a school board member from Douglas stated, "I firmly believe that if a student is involved in extracurricular activities he or she will have less time to get into trouble. By the time he or she practices,

eats dinner, and hits the books, there will be no time left for it." "Any problems already demonstrated at Coffee High will be compounded by the additional students," claimed a citizen of Broxton. A student at Nicholls exclaimed, "I am concerned about the drug problem at Coffee High." Another concern related to the issue of crime was the location of the middle school in the black section of town, according to one source.

With the middle school and high school being located in Douglas, transportation is a concern to some residents of Broxton and Nicholls. One person interviewed claimed, "Some students will be required to ride a bus almost 50 miles each day due to the consolidation decision." Another comment was, "There is no need to take bus trips so far from home." However, the distance did not seem important to a high school principal who stated, "Twenty-one miles is the most distance anyone will have to travel."

Traveling may be a problem for students, but traveling to a new high school and a new situation might cause even more problems. Some comments made by students include, "I feel that Coffee High students look down at us," "Coffee and Nicholls don't get along," and "The reason for consolidation was to improve the ball team." However, attempts were made to involve the

students from Broxton and Nicholls in the new school, according to a central office staff person. "Lock-ins were held along with tours of the school. Students from Broxton and Nicholls were placed on student council as officers. They were given every chance to become a part of the new school."

Those who don't become a part of the school may become dropouts if one is to believe results from some questionnaires. Respondents seem to think the increased traveling distance and bigger school will result in more students dropping out of school. A high school principal refutes this by saying, "We have a high dropout rate. The improvement of the vocational program will help alleviate this."

The last issue to be discussed from the sociological lens is that of students leaving the public school sector for the private school, or leaving Coffee County to attend school somewhere else. Students, citizens, and administrators discussed this problem. If one analyzes the results received, school size was the only factor in their decision. Race was not mentioned.

Political Science (Financial)

Through an analysis of the data, several perceived reasons for consolidating schools in Coffee County emerged. These reasons range from creating a better

football team to building a "showcase" high school to attract more business. This section is an attempt to focus on the financial reasons both perceived and supported by fact for consolidating the schools. Issues addressed in this interpretation section include QBE funding, economic factors, and citizens' views of the financial aspects of consolidation.

The Georgia Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) provides a funding formula to be used to assure needed funds for state-supported programs. The middle grades program is the base program for determining relative program costs. The costs of each component of the middle grades program are totaled and the result is given a weight of one. The other programs are assigned weights that reflect their cost relative to that of the middle grades program. QBE also specifies the base size for elementary schools as 450, middle schools as 624, and high schools as 970. If a system adopts a middle school program as defined by QBE, the system receives an additional 13% of all funds for students in grades 6, 7, and 8 (Georgia Department of Education, 1990).

There are also incentives for a system to consolidate when individual school enrollments are not at the base level. The State will fund 90% of the construction costs for consolidation. This funding will

not provide for the procurement of the land, building of intrascholastic sports facilities, or several other items that the local system will have to finance. The consolidated high school in Coffee County is expected to cost $10,819,178 with the state funding $9,237,070.

Coffee County had three high schools during the 1989-1990 school year. These schools and their enrollments were as follows:

Schools	Grades	Enrollment
Broxton School	K-5	274
	6-8	134
	9-12	147
		555 total
Nicholls School	K-5	255
	6-8	130
	9-12	142
		527 total
Coffee High	9-12	1,279

It is easy to see from these figures that Nicholls and Broxton Schools are below the base size for elementary, middle grade, and high school as specified by QBE. This meant that the local system, Coffee County, had to fund the difference. Due to the increased local funding of these schools, the Coffee County School System was at the legal maximum millage that could be levied without a referendum (20 mills). According to a member of the Coffee County Board of Education, "We were at 20 mills, above that is illegal... this year we would have been at 21 mills to

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meet obligations. If we are in deficit financing the state takes over management." The board member went on to highlight the effect of the additional local funding due to the schools being below the base. A near-by school system "Colquitt has a $31 million budget, Coffee has a $25 million budget, their millage is 8, ours is 20 mills." A principal from one of the high schools stated that "Coffee County has about 50 to 55 teachers above the state allocation. If you eliminate the 20 excess teachers required to run Nicholls and Broxton schools, you save $700,000 a year. In three years you get your money back from consolidation."

The high costs associated with schools below the base level is apparent when one looks at the cost per student. Coffee High's cost per student for the 1989-1990 school year was $300 while Broxton High's cost per student was over $800 and Nicholls High's was over $600. Nicholls had 11.46 teachers beyond what the state allocated yet had only thirty-one students in its graduating class, according to a local principal. The extra teachers required for Nicholls and Broxton Schools could perhaps be justified on an economic basis if the test scores at those schools was significantly higher than Coffee High s where the teacher-pupil ratio is much greater, but such is not the case. According to the

to consolidate was a financial one. One respondent stated "They are putting money ahead of the welfare of students." Another stated the "Facilities in Broxton and Nicholls are not fully utilized, which is a flamboyant waste of a taxpayers' money." An ex-school board member asked the question, "How can we financially support 10 schools as cheaply as 9 schools?" A state representative predicted "The facility will cost $20 million."

Many comments in the interviews reflected the rapid growth of Coffee County in recent years and the desire to attract more industry. A pharmacist from Nicholls expressed this concern:

> There has been $6 million spent on a new courthouse and a new library is being built that the voters turned down. The next project is the city/county complex which is actually a city complex. They now need the other jewel in the crown which is the new high school.

A citizen from Nicholls responded, "The business leaders in Douglas will now be able to take prospective businesses to the new high school and say, 'Look at our new school and all of its facilities.'" Concern was expressed by several interviewees that if a new high school were to be built, there would be no money

available for repair or improvements to the other schools in Coffee County for the next 8 to 10 years. This concern was best explained by a citizen of Nicholls who said,

> What the people of Coffee County don't understand is that the capital outlay money that they are going to receive is money that they would receive every year, it is just that the state will give it to you all at one time. Then you do have to pay it back and it will take 8 years to do so. Any building that needs repair would come out of local funds. There's $3 million that needs to be done to the junior high right now; where is that money going to come from?

A State Representative summed this issue up by saying, "If we take those funds and build a new school we can't do anything for the next ten years unless we float a bond or raise taxes. We don't know if we will need anything over the next ten years."

Building a second high school which would consolidate Broxton and Nicholls and relieve the overcrowding was an option to building one large consolidated high school. This concept was strongly supported by a principal when he stated,

Coffee is wrong in making one big high school. The state recommended we build a new high school but have two high schools. Coffee is not big enough for three high schools but it is big enough for two high schools.

He went on to state, "I'm surprised the state approved one large high school because it is a clear violation of the recommended school size." A board member discussed the plan for two high schools and said, "QBE funds high schools based on an FTE of 940, in Coffee County we probably have 1500 right now, we would not receive maximum funding (for two high schools)."

Validity and Verification of the Findings

The goal of any investigator is to produce research that is valid, reliable, and ethical. Conducting case study research should be no different, even though it involves naturalistic inquiry as the primary mode of attaining data. In traditional experimental research, reliability and validity are accounted for from the outset. Qualitative research, however, is full of emerging data which seems to make reliability and validity, like the data, an emerging process.

Only recently has the field of qualitative research looked into ethical concerns, unlike traditional research which has well established guidelines. This

issue of ethics, along with measures used to insure reliability and validity, will be discussed in this chapter.

Internal Validity

Internal validity according to Merrian (1988), is how one's findings match reality. The strategy used by the researchers to insure internal validity involved triangulation. This includes the use of multiple researchers, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods. In this research, all three of these resources were involved. The multiple researchers were the three individuals conducting the investigation. Interviews, documents, newspaper articles, and questionnaires were all used as sources of data. The two methods of research used were qualitative and some quantitative research (questionnaire).

A second method used to determine internal validity was the statement of researcher bias in the methodology section of this study. These biases were stated in terms of theoretical orientation.

Using both these methods it appears that this research has been proven internally valid. It should be remembered, however, that qualitative research has internal validity as one of its strengths (Merrian, 1988).

Reliability

In determining reliability in qualitative research, most researcher tend to believe it is no different than internal validity (Merriam, 1988). Rather than calling it reliability, some researchers have renamed it dependability. That is, rather than demanding that outsiders get the same results, one wishes others to agree that, given the data collected, the results make sense - they are consistent and dependable. The strategies for assuring this are investigator position and triangulation. Triangulation has been discussed previously in the internal validity section.

Investigator's postion explains the researcher's thoughts and concepts determining the study, basis for selecting informants and their description, and the social setting from which the data was collected. The thoughts and concepts of the authors were set out in the purpose section of this document, along with additional information involving biases and perspective lenses set forth in the methodology.

The basis used for selecting informants was a relatively simple one. The investigators wanted to include representatives from all areas, including educators, parents, students, board members, and citizens. All communities involved were represented.

The representatives from the different communities were interviewed at their place of choice and at their convenience. No person was interviewed in a social setting that would bias their comments. Most were interviewed in offices or in their homes.

External Validity

While internal validity and reliability seem to be accounted for in this research, external validity, or the ability to generalize results, does not appear to be so apparent. A case study is selected because one wishes to know about a particular event, not because a researcher is interested in what is generally true in many events. In addressing the issue of consolidation, there would appear to be no way to generalize results, as each case involving consolidation would most certainly be different. For this reason, external validity will not be considered a factor in this case study.

Ethics

The issue of ethics is relatively new to the field of qualitative research. As in quantitative research, care must be taken to assure that: (a) the researcher does not become overly involved in the issues or events under study; (b) data remain confidential; (c) there is not undue competition for access to and control over the

data; (d) the need to preserve the anonymity of subjects; and (e) the audience not being able to distinguish between data and the researcher's interpretation (Merriam, 1988).

It can be stated that none of the researchers became overly involved in the issues. All remained impartial when conducting interviews and in interpretation of data. Data have remained confidential in that names of interviewees were not mentioned in the text, only positions. Competition for access and control of data was not a factor in the research.

While access and control of data were not factors, anonymity of subjects was. Again, this was addressed by listing speakers by position in life only, and not by name.

The final ethical issue, that of not being able to distinguish between data and interpretation of the authors could have been a problem. However, the researchers attempted to solve it by quoting data sources as often as possible and by referring to the speaker, respondent, or document at all times.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The final chapter of this report will include conclusions from the different perspective lenses. These conclusions will relate to economics, school size,

and potential benefits to students. Following the conclusions, some recommendations for future research will be addressed.

Political Science (Financial) Conclusions

Coffee County is clearly in a financial dilemma, as there are three high schools in the county but only enough state money to support one. Much money has been spent in the past ten years renovating the two schools that are far below the funding base for high schools. The school that meets the base has room to accommodate the students from Broxton and Nicholls. The state provides many incentives to systems which consolidate schools that fall below the base level. Coffee County would like to expand several programs and introduce new ones, especially in the areas of vocational education, but Coffee County is prohibited from doing this because so much of their local money is used to pay for teachers that the state will not fund due to the school's enrollment not being at the base funding level. The current millage is 20 mills, which is the maximum allowed by law. Coupled with these concerns is the fact that Coffee County must submit a facilities plan to the State Department of Education. It is easy to see that much of the weight in determining the consolidation

issue in Coffee County is focused on the financial aspects.

When focusing on the financial aspects of consolidation through the lens of political science, the answer is clearly consolidation. Funding 50 teachers with local funds in a system the size of Coffee County is a drain on resources that could be used to develop other needed programs. Eighty percent of local dollars are spent on 30% of the students. The Coffee County Board of Education obviously had a very difficult decision to make but as a government bureau, their decision not only involves financial considerations, but also involves political acceptability, demand, and expediency. The decision to consolidate the schools is in the best financial interest of the citizens of Coffee County. However, the decision to build one large high school may not be in the best interest of the students in the county. Perhaps the impact of the decision can best be summed up by a member of the board of education when he stated, "Kids adjust, parents never do."

Political Science (Power) Conclusions

Power is basically held by the state authorities in the state of Georgia. The state funds schools as prescribed in QBE, and decides who gets what based on the various formulas and weights set forth in that

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document. This refers to "reward" power. It should also be remembered that the state has the power to punish those systems that do not adhere to the guidelines of QBE. Indirectly, the state was the ultimate decision maker in the process of consolidating tne Coffee County School system.

Next in the hierarchial ranking of powers was the local board of education. Even though the board had to adhere to state guidelines, there were some decisions they were allowed to make. The school board decided on the final version of the five-year facilities plan, subject to state approval. The board also had the final vote on consolidation, even though pressure was on them from the state to vote in favor of the issue. They could have taken a chance and chosen other options that would not have brought the amount of money they would receive as a result of the way they did vote.

The citizens of the county appeared to be close to the bottom rung in regard to possession of power. Many citizens felt they.were totally disregarded as to their feelings toward consolidation. They felt that the school board was not responsive to their needs. However, in the end the citizens wield the ultimate power in electing members to the board of education.

Finally, in possession of little or no power in regard to this issue, are the students. According to some respondents, the decision to consolidate was based partly on benefits that will be available to the students. Yet some of the Broxton and Nicholls' students report they will in fact not benefit from the consolidation because they will attend other school facilities available to them, such as private schools or schools in adjacent counties.

Bitterness will remain as a result of the decision to consolidate by the local board of education. It can only be hoped that in time the people who will bear the brunt of this decision, the students, will come through unscathed and will indeed, as hoped for, receive a better education.

Sociological Conclusions

Looking at the issue of reorganization from a sociological perspective, it is truly difficult to determine if reorganization is in the best interest of all concerned. There is no doubt that the communities of Broxton and Nicholls will lose a lot of their identity and community spirit as a result of this process. The schools will lose their identity entirely. Broxton and Nicholls have always had independent sports programs that have put them on the map. During the

1989-90 school year the Broxton girls' basketball team won the state championship and the boys have been to the state tournament several times. Nicholls traditionally has outstanding baseball teams and tremendous spirit pours forth from the student body. Individuals will also forfeit some of their identity. They will no longer be known by their first names or see "Aunt Martha" in the hallway of their school.

While identities may be lost, curriculum advantages will be gained. Who would argue that a student will benefit from an opportunity to take subjects of interest and importance to him or her, and then have a chance to enhance the mind by adding enrichment subjects. What about the student from Nicholls who never had the opportunity to operate the machines available in an advanced machine shop but has an interest in mechanics? Indeed, chances for increased learning will be available.

Other issues, such as extracurricular activities could benefit some while hurting others. Racial issues have not surfaced, but they seem to be simmering below the surface as people from Nicholls and Broxton do not want their children attending the middle school across from the "block" in the "bad part of town." Traveling distance and dropout rates were also discussed, but time

will tell if these are factors to be considered seriously.

In closing, it should be stated that the author attended a small high school (graduating class of 52). There was something to be said for knowing everyone in not only your senior class but in the entire high school. What was more important was that they knew you. It is great to go to class reunions and know everyone there after 15 years. It is sad to see the closings of Nicholls and Broxton High Schools, knowing how much those schools mean to their communities. Time alone will tell if the right decision was made.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation the investigators feel needs to be made is to continue research on this issue. The consolidation itself is just the beginning. Research can be done concerning the effect the closing of schools will have on communities and businesses. From the other viewpoint, an ethnography could be done to determine if the city of Douglas benefits from the reorganization. Student relationships in the new school would be an interesting topic to investigate. Researchs could also investigate such questions as: How effective is the comprehensive high school? Will test scores go up? Will the dropout rate go down? How effective will

the new vocational program be in training students to enter the work force?

More research needs to be done in the area of large schools vs. small schools. Which one is indeed the better concept? Will traveling time affect student performance?

As can be seen, much research could be done as a follow-up to the consolidation process. Only by sharing results of what an investigation produces can changes be made in the ways in which schools must face the consolidation issue.

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APPENDIX A

RESULTS OF MAILED QUESTIONNAIRES

100 questionnaires sent
29 returned
26 usable

Statement 1:
The decision to consolidate was made based on what is best for the students of Coffee County.

42% agreed or strongly agreed
46% disagreed or strongly disagreed
12% no opinion

Statement 2:
The decision to consolidate was based on financial considerations.

70% agreed or strongly agreed
27% disagreed or strongly disagreed
3% no opinion

Statement 3:
The decision to consolidate will provide benefits previously not available to all students.

68% agreed or strongly agreed
24% disagreed or strongly disagreed
8% no opinion

Statement 4:
A large comprehensive high school will be good for the students of Coffee County.

58% agreed or strongly agreed
42% disagreed or strongly disagreed
everyone had an opinion on this issue

Place a check mark above how you feel.

1. Do you agree with this statement?

   The decision to consolidate was made based on what is best for the students of Coffee County.

____	____	____	____	____
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

2. Do you agree with this statement?

   The decision to consolidate was based on financial considerations (funding, lower taxes, etc.).

____	____	____	____	____
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

3. Do you agree with this statement?

   The decision to consolidate will provide benefits previously not available to all students (more course offerings, more social interactions, more facilities, etc.).

____	____	____	____	____
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

4. Do you agree with this statement?

A large comprehensive high school will be good for the students of Coffee County.

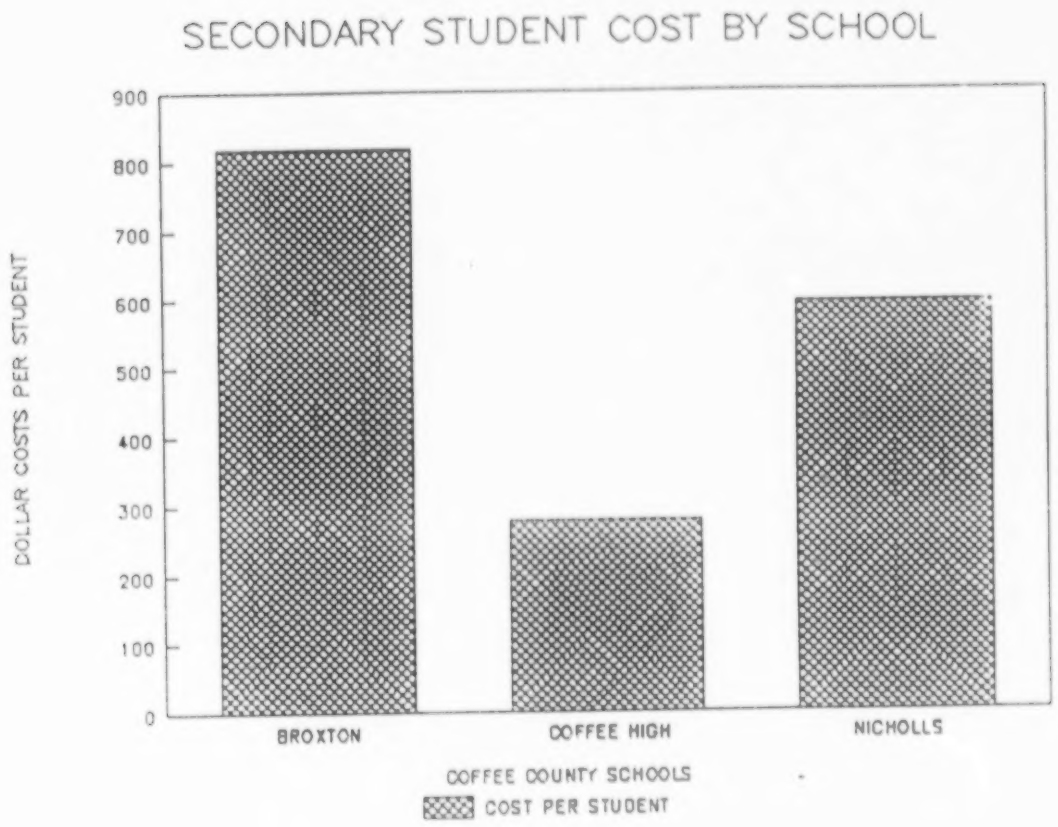
Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
____	____	____	____	____

IF YOU WISH TO MAKE A COMMENT CONCERNING ANY OF THE QUESTIONS, PLEASE DO SO IN THE SPACE BELOW.

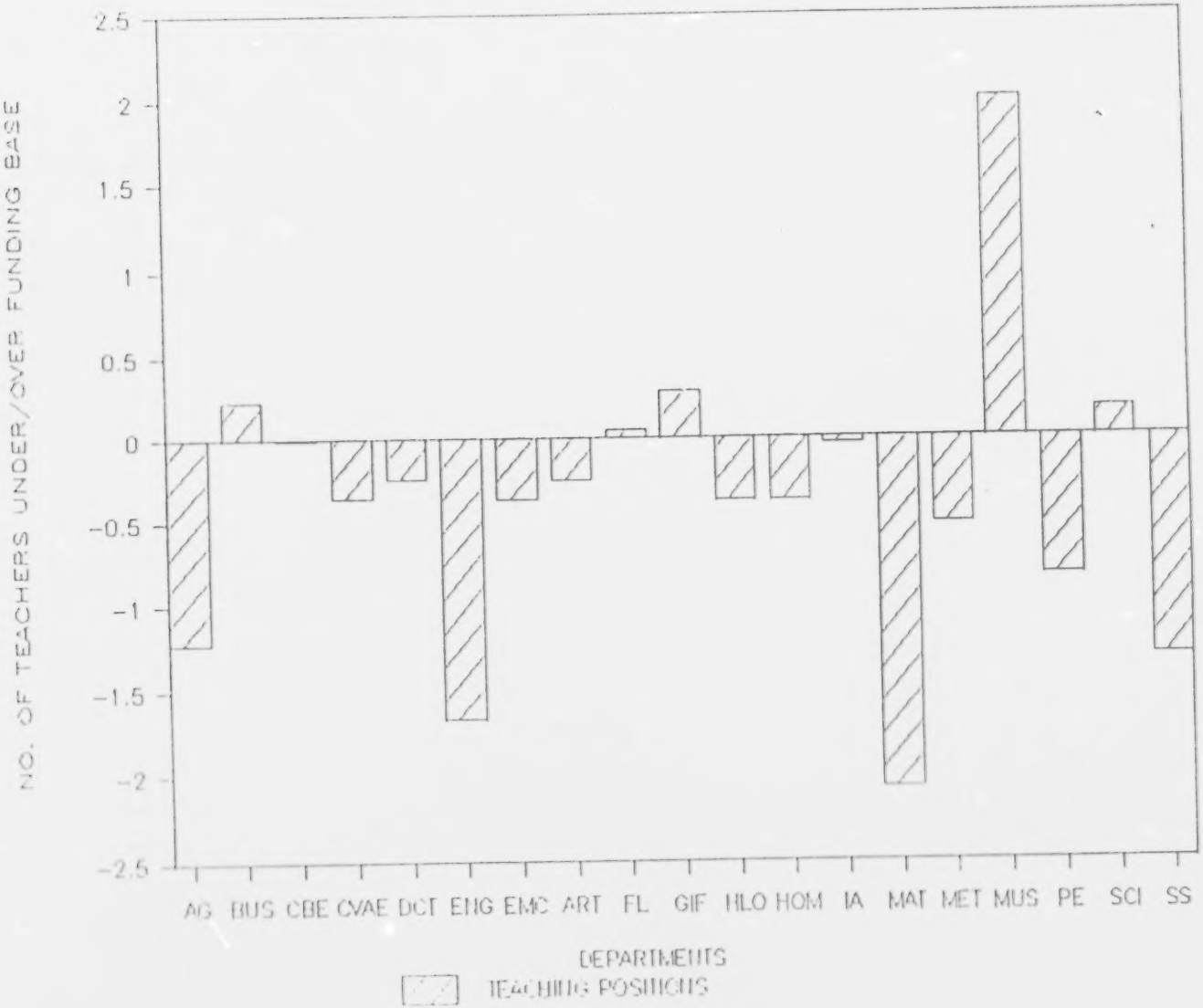
AGAIN, THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY AND MAILING IT BACK. YOUR HELP IS GREATLY APPRECIATED.

1989-90 SCHOOL YEAR

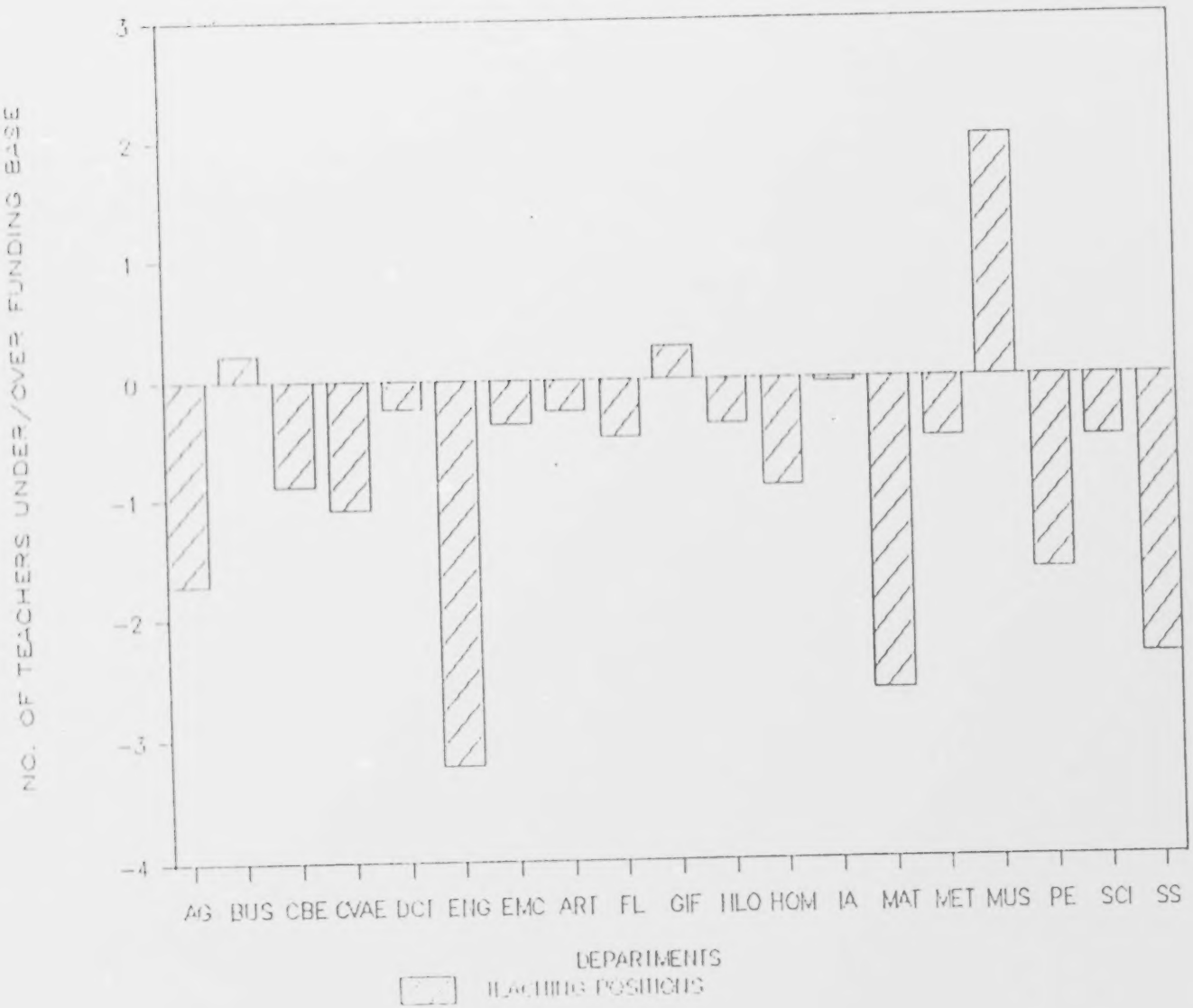
DIRECT INSTRUCTION LOCAL DOLLARS

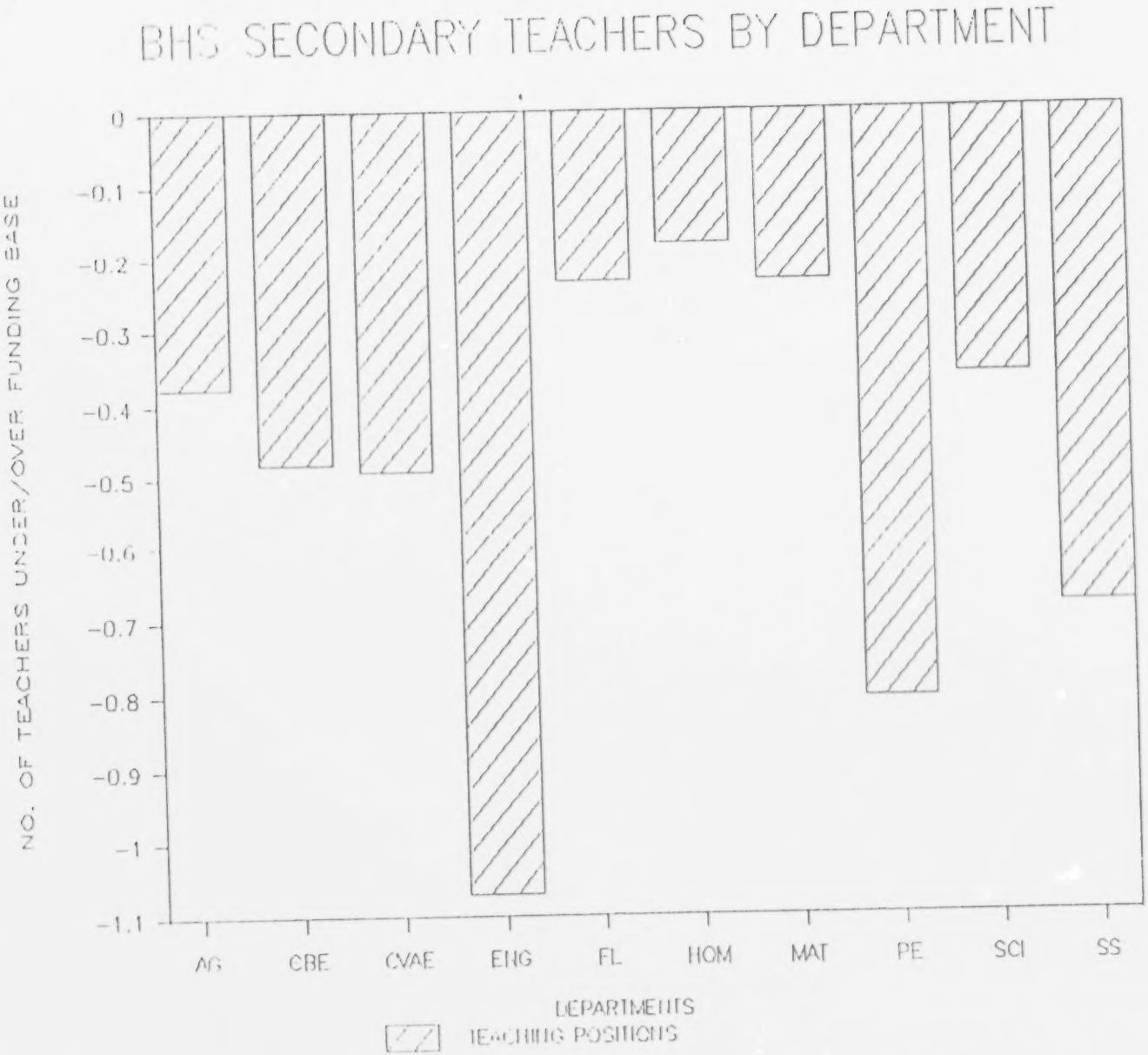


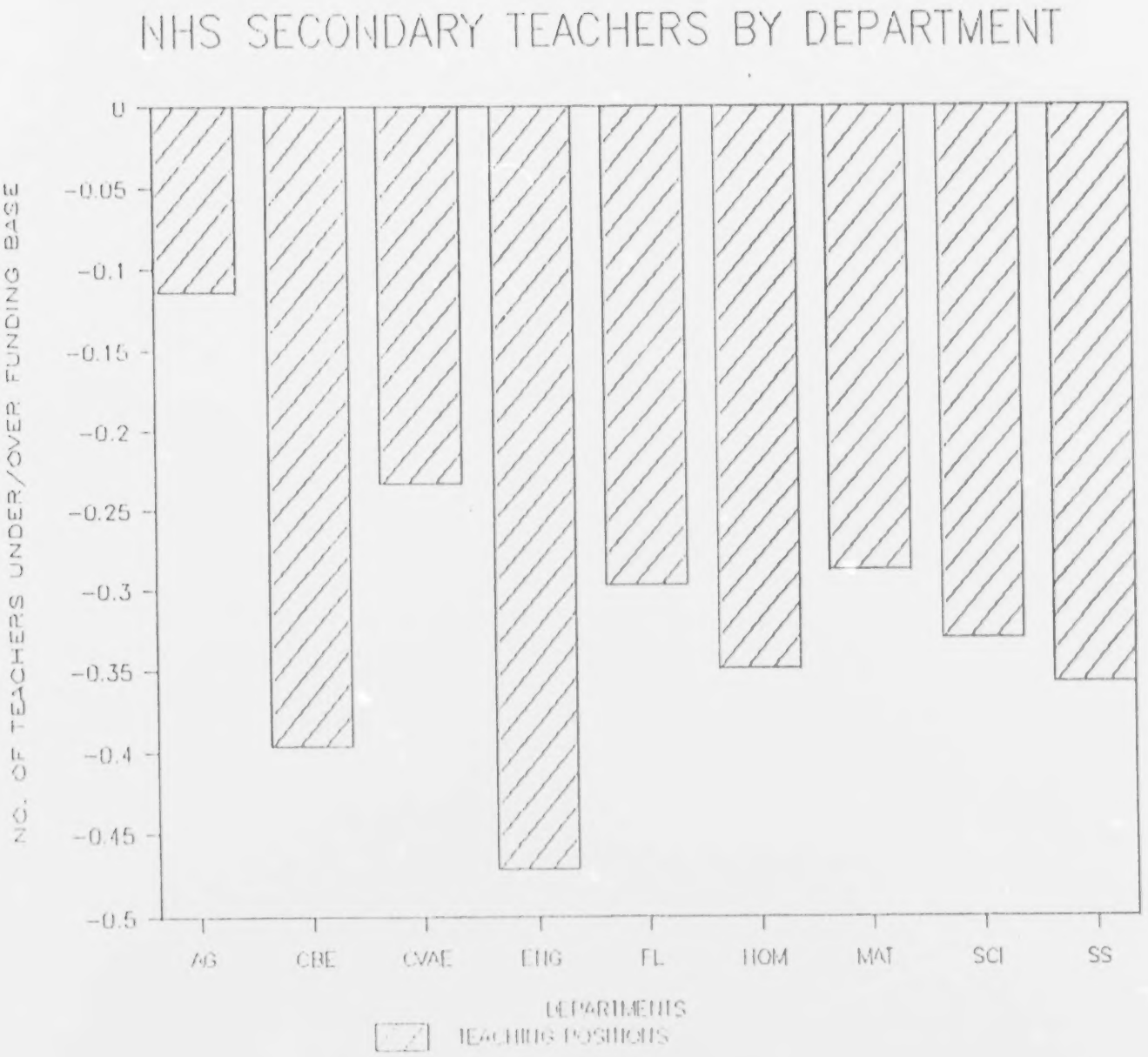
CHS SECONDARY TEACHERS BY DEPARTMENT



SYSTEM SECONDARY TEACHERS BY DEPARTMENT




BHS SECONDARY TEACHERS BY DEPARTMENT
NO. OF TEACHERS UNDER/OVER FUNDING BASE
0
-0.1
-0.2
-0.3
-0.4
-0.5
-0.6
-0.7
-0.8
-0.9
-1
-1.1
AG
CBE
CVAE
ENG
FL
HOM
MAT
PE
SCI
SS
DEPARTMENTS
TEACHING POSITIONS


NHS SECONDARY TEACHERS BY DEPARTMENT
NO. OF TEACHERS UNDER/OVER FUNDING BASE
0
-0.05
-0.1
-0.15
-0.2
-0.25
-0.3
-0.35
-0.4
-0.45
-0.5
AG
CBE
CVAE
ENG
FL
HOM
MAT
SCI
SS
DEPARTMENTS
TEACHING POSITIONS

Georgia Department of Education
Office of Administrative Services
Twin Towers East
Atlanta, Georgia 30334-5050

Werner Rogers
State Superintendent of Schools

Hall Rogers
Associate State Superintendent

October 24, 1989

Mr. Sidney L. Cottingham
Cottingham and Porter, P.C.
Attorneys at Law
319 East Ashley Street
Post Office Box 798
Douglas, Georgia 31533

Dear Mr. Cottingham:

As we discussed, the organizational pattern that would be most beneficial for Coffee County is K-5, 6-8, and 9-12. In this organizational pattern, all elementary schools would be kept open as K-5 schools, including Broxton and Nicholls. District lines to ensure that all of the elementary schools would meet or exceed the minimum membership requirement for full participation in the Capital Outlay program of 304 students would be necessary. The current junior high school and high school would be used as the two facilities for all students in grades 6-8. A new high school for all students in grades 9-12 would be constructed with a physical education building in lieu of a gymnasium. The gymnasium for high school athletic events would be located in the city of Douglas.

While the new high school is being planned and constructed, the temporary organizational and operational plan for school years 1990-91 and 1991-92 would be for grades K-6 at all elementary schools except Broxton and Nicholls which would be organized as K-8 schools. Grades 7 and 8 would be housed at the current junior high school and all 9-12 students in the system would attend Coffee County High School.

The budget for the new high school would be computed utilizing the state formula for new high schools as shown on Attachment I. The time line for developing a new plan and submitting an application for the new high school is shown on Attachment II.

I hope that this information will answer your questions concerning this organizational pattern and assist Coffee County in reaching a decision regarding the organizational pattern to be adopted. If you need additional information regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Frank G. Cloer

Frank G. Cloer
Director
Facilities Section

FGC:bg

Attachments

cc: Dr. Travis J. Ouzts, Superintendent

ATTACHMENT I

PROPOSED BUDGET

NEW COFFEE COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL

New High School--Estimated Cost 76 Instructional Units	$10,819,178
LESS: Cost of High School Gymnasium	- 1,098,908
PLUS: Cost of High School Physical Ed. Bldg. (10,000 square feet)	+ 499,100
Adjusted Cost for New High School	$10,219,770

Funding Sources:

STATE FUNDS	$ 9,237,070
REQUIRED LOCAL FUNDS	486,162
ADDITIONAL REQUIRED LOCAL (Penalty for funds previously expended for 9-12 students at Broxton and Nicholls)	496,538
TOTAL CONSTRUCTION BUDGET	$10,219,770

ADDITIONAL LOCAL FUNDS WOULD BE NEEDED FOR:

A site for the new High School and athletic fields	Costs to be determine
Site Development	Estimated Costs Approximately 10% of the cost of the project.
Parking Lots and Paving	
Landscaping	
Furniture and Equipment	

ATTACHMENT II

PROPOSED SCHEDULE FOR

DEVELOPMENT OF PLAN AND SUBMITTAL OF APPLICATION

Coffee County Board of Education adopts organizational pattern	November 1989
Local Facilities Plan developed and adopted by the Coffee County Board of Education and the State Board of Education	March 1990
Advance Funding Application for a new high school developed	Summer 1990
Legislative approval of funding	March 1991
Funds become available (subject to legislative approval)	July 1991
Occupy new high school	September 1993